

The Knowledge Bank at The Ohio State University

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The Engineer's Bookshelf

By Wilson R. Dumble

Mr. Kenneth K. Mercer, Eng. 1, a former student in my English 413 and 414 classes, appears this month as guest writer in this column. His review of Prof. Stephen Leacock's delightful book, *Too Much College*, is so very well written that I thought it worth publication in *The Ohio State Engineer*. It is with pride that I offer Mr. Mercer's review.

Mr. Leacock is a Professor Emeritus of McGill University at Montreal. He has dedicated his life to the two most worthy processes of acquiring knowledge and professing knowledge. He has written this book with a wide and varied experience of training, teaching, lecturing, and retiring.

The entire book is saturated with subtle but hilarious puns on contemporary curricula, students, and professors. *TOO MUCH COLLEGE* is a collection of Mr. Leacock's observations in regard to the prevalent customs, faults, and merits to which we all either have been or are being exposed. Occasionally, a remedy for a fault or a praise of a merit is offered. Continually, the existing customs are discussed with inimitable jesting yet with sound judgment. Also within the book are *Kindred Essays in Education* and *Little Stories for Good Luck*. Both are a series of short chapters depicting an amusing incident or vividly baring a human characteristic. Never in the music of his sentences is found a sour note. He expounds his theories, observations, and jokes with a tender, understanding kindness.

To fully appreciate the work of this living humorist, let us consider a few of the most outstanding points included within this symposium of Mr. Leacock's best remembered works.

How strange it is, our little procession of life! The child says, "When I am a big boy." But what is that? The big boy says, "When I grow up." According to Mr. Leacock it is a most obvious custom for the majority of the modern populace to mortgage its time. Then when the long desired retirement comes, the end is nigh and somehow we have missed it all.

Almost every student experiences that glad hour when he has "finished" mathematics or has filled his requirements in "compulsory" English. So after four long years the student graduates and receives his "sheepskin", or is it a "pigskin"? He steps out of college a free man, without a stain on his character—and not much on his mind.

How long has grown the period of life dedicated to education! In the old days to obtain a law degree, one needed just three summers on a farm and three winters in an office. Nowadays, a lawyer at the age of thirty when his predecessor was well established is still writing an advanced thesis on social impetus. We begin our lives ten years too late, but Death is on time.

The student advances in his education in a crab-like-fashion. For instance, in the study of Latin he will barely get the general idea of the passive voice when his well-meaning pedagogue will blow a retreat behind the safe lines of *amo*. Thus do the students drift back and forth like a star cluster among the constellations.

Still another fault of modern curricula, applying especially to elementary and high schools, is the incorporation of students of unequal ability and initiative within the same classes. Soon the students fall into a sort of convoy system, some plying the tempestuous seas of education under forced draft, while others leisurely drift along the currents. A remedy would be to cultivate the desire to have knowledge and to learn. A person with the desire to advance in knowledge could accomplish his aims in nearly fifty percent of the present time consumed.

One of the major faults in today's educational system is the sharp division between the education offered within the vine covered sanctuaries of some college and that given by the school of life. Often is heard: "When I get my Masters I shall quit studying forever". How biased is the attitude of that person. Many should be the laurels received by those who throughout their life accumulate wisdom and fall not into the rut of self satisfaction.

Should the student be subjected to Latin merely to acquaint him with the meaning of the *Ars Gratia Artis* above the Metro Goldwyn Lion? Quite prevalent are the advertisements in regard to the vitamin content of food. If we let vitamin A be mathematics, reading and writing, B, surely Latin will be found not far down the list of educational vitamins. Students of Latin acquire a detachment from words and change from the servants to the masters of language. Latin acts as a base for our education and might be compared to the ballast in the hold of a ship. Without the ballast the ship tends to roll and pitch with every whim of wind and wave, but with the ballast every dip and curve becomes graceful and controlled. Latin students complain they can't read Latin; but neither could the Romans. In the days when Cicero was in his glory, and the daily news, love romances, and crime stories did not exist, there was no need of a rapidly comprehensible written language. Indeed, the Roman writers took their pens in hand even as we don our Sunday clothes. They wanted to get the full effect and expected it to take a few moments reflection to grasp the thought.

In regard to mathematics it would be very beneficial if puzzles were eliminated. The multiplication table might be tricky but it's fair. The question of just how we know that one plus two is three might be asked. Any attempt towards explanation in concrete terms of the mathematical thought processes certainly bears witness to the profundity of mathematics. It is written that when the boy, Isaac Newton, read the theorem stating "the three angles of a triangle are together equal to two right angles", little Newton said, "Why, of course, obviously so." Undoubtedly, there are enormous differences of natural aptitude. Mr. Le-

cock advises fewer puzzles and less mystery in regard to the relationship of numbers and symbols.

The annual mass attack of students upon a foreign language and their repulse is most amusing yet disastrous. Instead of the laborious process of learning that *bonus-a-um* means good, the student should think in the foreign language rather than translate. Usually speed is sacrificed for accuracy. A happy medium between those two essentials must be reached before a student can be proficient in a foreign language.

What, the government is in debt? Ah, open a gold mine; that'll balance the budget! The reason that suggestion is unsound will be found within the vacillating principles of economics. Mr. Leacock's chapter upon that subject is entitled *Has Economics Gone to Seed?* In the days before World War Number One the theory was for everyone to work hard and save money, and the spendthrift was considered an enemy to society. Now, where is that theory? Oh, give everybody in Alberta \$25 a month. Don't save; spend! The pump must be primed! Now that the foundation of economics has crumbled away and living men can't think, the tendency is to resort to all the dead men ever thought. That's the stuff, statistics! The continental area of the United States is 3,026,789, etc. Make a four year course and give a degree in it—a D.F. Economics is stunned by the changing world conditions and must yet awake to find its path of sound ethics.

Among the arts in every age there is one that is the black art—mysterious, fearsome, a thing to dread. Psychology is that art. It could be classified as an art, a science, a theory, a practice, an experiment, a business, and a religion. Brains are tested by anything from watched reactions to the micrometer of the physiologist. It has us all doped out as a maze of complexes, suggestions, fixations, and behaviors. Right or wrong, good and bad are all mixed up in a terrifying world of dark forces including hypnosis. After all we are probably a complex concoction of electrical charges subject to opposite and like charges according to the laws of electricity.

The ship of education has gathered so great a load of barnacles that it has become unwieldy. The barnacles are those courses substituted, say for algebra, for those few who can't or, perhaps, won't "get" algebra. Therefore these students take archery, etc. It is well known that it is impossible to get something for nothing. Yet students attempt to obtain a good education by means of all sorts of courses evading the real thing. The rigor of actual study is substituted for make believe courses and idleness. This is still another reason why education is eating up life. The prevalent custom is to shout "Rah! rah! College!" and to enjoy snap courses and free hours. It is quite obvious what the results will be.

To fully appreciate the wisdom and wit in the other short chapters of the book it is necessary for one to read them himself. The spicy richness of the remaining works can be by no means transferred without the loss of some of the flavor.

The foregoing points are but a few expressed within **Too Much College**. Let us enjoy each moment of life's short span, lest when it is gone we regret the time spent in weeping. Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag and read at your leisure **Too Much College**.
